

General rains fell over the shortgrass country Sunday night, the eighth of October. San Angelo weathermen made a call for a 70 percent chance on the Sunday morning forecast. Giving a 70 percent chance of rain in this land the Indians called "Thin Promise" falls in line with predicting that 70 percent of the people who went to Las Vegas last year are going to open savings accounts this year and stay home to study Mr. Greenspan's advice.

The 70 percent from my vantage point at the ranch was coming in lopsided over the taped message from the weather bureau. The tape said, "At 5 a.m., it is raining in San Angelo. Five-tenths of an inch have fallen since midnight." At 5 a.m. the gauge on the south side of the ranch house held two and one-tenth inches. My friend 12 miles south of me had two point seven inches. An ol' insomniac coot of a herder south of here reported three inches.

I had to wait until 6 a.m. for the late riser report. Over north of Mertzon, where the dust has been settled nicely in the past 18 months, two inches were recorded. One cagey hombre played his hand tight against his chest by claiming they'd had a slow rain all night at a river town called Christoval. A rain so slow, the last drops hadn't dripped down the tube of his gauge for a final reading at 6

o'clock in the morning. The fact that his wife was grumbling in the background to unplug the telephone before another idiot rancher called to find out how much it rained shaded the story.

Oldtime shortgrassers denied being in bed for a call three minutes after midnight, much less before daylight. In the days of rising dust, deep tracks and thin residue over the ranch land, a strong belief reigned among the herders that 14-hour days were going to reduce the awful balances on the mortgages and chattels hanging as heavy on their necks as blacksmith anvils. An old fellow ranching up the Big Draw from us in the 1950s burned up an enamel coffee pot every six months boiling coffee from two in the morning to daybreak. He became quite social about two a.m., cranking his telephone into action on the party line, the only outlet possible in the days when the central telephone office closed at nine at night.

He always spoke well of me. One Christmas season, he roared up to the old ranch to borrow a Mexican cowboy. He caught me in his headlights going to the barn carrying a milk bucket. In those days, the only dances we made were Christmas and Fourth of July. Even as well versed as he was in the mores of the neighborhood from eavesdropping on the telephone, he didn't realize I was up because I hadn't been

to bed. Milking the cow ahead of time was a ruse to get more sleep.

However, all ranch citizens become restless close to tax deadlines, during documentation and audit of sworn statements on the application for government payments, before 180-day cycles of demand notes, and the combination of all of the above. Those awesome events tend to cause hombres to arise way before dawn to be on the lookout for trouble like the Indian fighters of old. Hard to slip up on an old boy packing a \$40 note on a \$20 ewe nursing a 30-pound lamb on his pillow. And even less likely if he's soaked a herd of nine, 10 and 11 year-old cows deeper than Old Ned's basement to pay the lease on an outfit where the buzzards scout year-round for its bounty.

Late as it is, the rain is going to make us all feel better. I am attached to the recorded voices from the weather station. I've met greaseball mechanics from Barnhart and tight-handed jugkeepers from as far east as Mason scurrying around following the hollow horn and woolie trade. But I never have met a weatherman. Weather forecasters must be like those shy bittern birds hiding in the reeds in the wetlands.

Could be the meteorologists stationed in San Angelo are being punished for making bum forecasts in climates

where a stock broker could hold the job. Weather forecasting is a cinch out here as long as rain is left from the forecast. All the weather prophet needs to say is, "High wind advisory on area lakes. Dust storms possible in the river beds. Whirlwinds likely on the golf courses and public flower gardens. Low in the morning such and such: high in the afternoon a miserable so-and-so."

Weeds and winter grass will soon be covering the bare spots. Pillows will have deeper creases; wives will be able to sleep longer once the novelty of rain wears off. It sure pumps life into the shortgrass country. I'd like to meet the weather people before another weather failure befalls us...